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ABSTRACT

Since the ability to make good decisions and take appropriate actions is dependent upon the accuracy of relevant information, it is important to understand the ways in which knowledge of the world can be distorted or biased. This paper is a systematic review of the literature concerning three ways in which distortion or bias can be associated with the information an individual gets in interpersonal communication: the systematic selection process in terms of who talks to whom, the biases in the communicator's decoding of the message, and the biases in the communicator's encoding of the message. An extensive list of references is included. (JM)

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BIAS IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION¹

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Making decisions and taking action depends on a consideration of relevant information. Suppose, for example, you were interested in buying a sound system and you knew of one for sale. The decision to buy or not buy the system might depend on an evaluation of the following information: The price--it has to be something you can afford, and the fidelity of the system--it has to reproduce the kind of music you like without much distortion. Assuming the price is right, you need to know about the fidelity of the system. In general, there are three ways in which one can acquire any knowledge. One is through direct sensory experience. In the present case, you could listen to the system to evaluate its fidelity. A second way of gaining knowledge is to infer it from what is already known. If you know the quality of the components you could infer the fidelity of the system without having listened to it. A third way of acquiring knowledge is through information communicated by others. You could, for example, evaluate the fidelity of the system on the basis of what someone tells you about it.

Our ability to make good decisions and take appropriate actions is limited by how accurate our relevant knowledge is. It is, therefore, important to understand the ways in which our knowledge of the world can be distorted or biased. Each of the sources of knowledge, i.e., direct sensory experience, inference from what is known, and information from others, can leave one with a biased or distorted picture of the world. Suppose you listened to the system after having become adapted (Helson, 1964) to or used to a very poor quality system. At first, a system that was a trifle better would sound fine. Although its flaws would be recognized later, your initial experience would lead you to buy the wrong system. The inference process can also go awry. Suppose you know that each component is first rate and infer that

the system will also be first rate. It is possible, however, that this particular combination of components does not reproduce sound very well. Finally, the information you get from someone else concerning the system may be biased. It is this kind of bias with which we will be concerned in the remainder of this module.

The information we receive from others can be biased in several ways. One bias is associated with whom we talk to. People differ with respect to their point of view, expertise, access and exposure to various kinds of information. If one does not talk with a particular kind of person then whatever unique information that kind of person has is not available. For example, talking with friends who only listen to country music might give you a good feel for how the sound system reproduces that kind of music but not how it would reproduce full orchestral music. Still another problem is that the person of whom you inquire may have made mistakes initially in his own acquisition and processing of relevant information. That is, there may be some systematic distortion in his decoding of a relevant message. If he does not accurately decode the message he cannot accurately encode, i.e., transmit the message to you. Suppose the person that you talked with had heard the system while under the influence of drugs. This influence interfered with his acquisition of accurate knowledge about the system. He could not then give you an accurate account of the system regardless of how hard he tried. Finally, suppose he were capable of decoding relevant messages accurately. It is still possible that the information we receive from him may be distorted. This could be due to some systematic bias in how he encodes the message (i.e. what he actually puts in the message). For example, one might expect the person trying to sell the system not to encode or

transmit his knowledge of its bad features.

We have briefly mentioned three ways in which distortion or bias can be associated with information an individual gets in interpersonal communication. Such distortion may be attributed to a systematic selection process in terms of who talks to whom, to biases in the communicator's decoding of the message, and to biases in the communicator's encoding of the message. Below we more systematically explore each.

A. WHO TALKS TO WHOM

As mentioned above, to the extent that we avoid talking to some kinds of people while relying on others, the information we get is likely to be biased or one-sided. There are at least three determinants of who talks to whom. First, the environment that one finds oneself in may limit the persons with whom one talks. Second, the recipient can exert a certain amount of influence in determining whom he will listen to. Finally, the communicator can be selective in whom he talks to. In turn, we will examine each of these factors to see how they work in systematically regulating communication with various kinds of people.

1. Environmental Determination of Communicators and Recipients

People are limited by a variety of environmental factors in whom they can talk to. To begin with, it takes time and time may be unavailable. Even the impression that there is insufficient time might be expected to influence the amount of talking that people engage in. Moscovici (1967) reports an experiment in which pairs of subjects were asked to discuss the effects of movies on juvenile delinquency. Some pairs received no mention of a time limit, but were stopped after 20 minutes. Other pairs were asked to reach a common conclusion, and after 15 minutes were told that

they had only 5 minutes left. The remaining pairs were told at the outset that they had only 15 minutes for discussion and were reminded of the amount of time left after every 5 minutes. Moscovici found that the more explicit the time pressure the fewer words per minute were used in the discussions. He also noted that because of their preoccupation with the time limit the third group of subjects did not actually strike up a real conversation, but merely tried to say something.

Physical distance is another constraining factor. Dodd (1955) instructed a team of interviewers to reveal a new coffee slogan to 17% of the housewives of a small town. The housewives were told that a census of all the households would be conducted two days later and that a free pound of coffee would be given to each household where the slogan was known by then. Although nearly all eventually heard the message, those people who lived closer to each other were more likely to have heard the message by a given point in time than were those who lived farther away from each other.

Sharing the same enclosure or physical facilities also increases the likelihood of communication. Altman and Haythorn (1965) obtained such an effect in an experiment that they conducted with pairs of volunteer naval recruits. Nine pairs each worked and slept in a small room for ten consecutive days, with no contact at all permitted with people outside. Nine control pairs also worked together, in each case, for about the same amount of time. However each control individual lived in his barracks and could spend the evening elsewhere on the base. Observation of each pair was through a one-way screen. More talking did indeed go on in the isolated groups than in the control groups. Another example is provided by Deutsch and Collins (1965).

who studied white housewives living in bi-racial public housing projects. In two projects the whites had been assigned along with blacks to the same multiple dwelling, while in two other projects the whites had been assigned to live in segregated, i.e., all-white vs. all-black, dwellings. When questioned about their contacts with black housewives in the project, the nonsegregated whites reported that their contacts occurred principally in the building where they lived, at the common laundry facilities in or near their building, and on the benches outside their building. By way of contrast, the segregated whites reported that their chief contacts with black occurred while shopping in stores and at tenant meetings. Clearly the nonsegregated whites had more favorable opportunities than the segregated whites for communication with blacks, and did in fact acknowledge far more often that the person they knew best in the project was a black.

Some social scientists (Barnlund, 1968, pp. 74-76) distinguish between physical and "functional" (usable, workable) distance and show that functional distance may sometimes be the more important determinant of communication. For example, a study was made in two housing projects for married students. Families that lived in apartments that were not immediately adjacent but who shared the same stairwell were more likely to get to know and to talk to one another, being functionally closer, than those whose apartments were adjacent but who did not share the same means of access and egress (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). Similarly, the manner in which filing cabinets and desks are placed in large office spaces directly influences which office personnel are more likely to converse (Gullahorn, 1952).

It goes almost without saying that technological developments have made it possible to interpose some physical facility or channel--a telephone

line, Tel-Star, etc.--between two physically remote potential communicators, the effect being one of enormously reducing the functional distance between them. The assumption, of course, is that these facilities are in good working order and that the demand on them at any one time is not too great. The possibility exists, however, that the ready availability of such a channel might be regarded by either party as bringing them too close for comfort, functionally speaking. The prevalence of the unlisted phone number gives silent testimony to this fact.

If we were to note where people sit relative to each other and to observe the flow of conversation, we would discover still another way in which their arrangement affects communication. For example, when people are seated around a circular table, those who face each other talk to each other far more than do those who sit adjacent (Steinzor, 1950). Barker (1968) has noted that the manner in which the pulpit and the seats are arranged relative to each other in many churches, parallels the intended direction of communication.

At a more symbolic level, the notion of "functional distance" seems applicable when we consider whether the cultural background and language at the disposal of two people may affect whether they are likely to talk to one another. It is hardly surprising to learn that fluency in the language of a foreign country is directly associated with the amount of social interaction that goes on between the visiting foreigner and the natives of that country (Brein & David, 1971). If the visitor and the host each speaks a totally different language they are, for practical purposes, functionally inaccessible to one another. Often a visitor may have only an elementary knowledge of the other's language, and may soon be shocked to discover that

his knowledge is no longer satisfactory once he attempts to progress beyond a superficial level of conversation. Even if he were to master the verbal aspects of the foreign language, this might not suffice. According to Hall (1959) the nonverbal aspects of inter-cultural communication are more important than the verbal aspects. Whether or not Hall is correct, the scientific literature on intercultural communication suggests that the immediate outcome of the visitor's discovery that his host is relatively inaccessible is a stage of maladjustment that has come to be known as "culture shock." Some equate "culture shock" with the experience that one's expectations regarding the host culture have not been confirmed (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). This stage is apt to be followed by a reduction in attempts to initiate conversation.

A similar notion of "distance" is used by Moscovici (1967) to describe a situation in which one potential communicator is more knowledgeable about a subject matter than is another. Moscovici uses the hypothetical example of a layman who tries to talk to a mathematician about mathematics. To understand each other they are apt to communicate in some roundabout fashion. The layman, for instance, will use more words and a more diversified vocabulary in talking to the specialist than to another layman about this distant subject matter. These suppositions were partly confirmed through a survey on the automobile market during which each subject was encouraged by the interviewer to talk about his car. First the subject was to imagine that the interviewer was a friend. Later he was to imagine that the interviewer was a car specialist. Moscovici found that when talking to the "specialist" the average subject repeated ordinary words less often but technical words more often than when he talked to a "friend."

Formal and unfamiliar circumstances also serve to increase the functional distance between speakers. One index of this increased distance is the formality of language used. For example, Moscovici and Pion (1966) had pairs of individuals converse with each other using seating arrangements that differed in formality and familiarity. They found that the more formal and unfamiliar the arrangement, the more the spoken language resembled the formality of written language.

Communication may be greatly affected by striking changes in the environment. The events or objects that come to our attention may be rare. They may be of unusual size, shape, color, or sound. They may be perceived as of exceptional importance. For example, they may pose unusual threats of a physical, social, or economic nature. Once such events or objects preempt our attention, they become a prime subject matter for discussion. During the evening of October 30, 1938, Orson Welles performed a dramatization on the radio of the War of the Worlds, in the form of a news broadcast. This broadcast gave a highly realistic account of how Earth was in the process of being invaded by Martians. Thousands of Americans, particularly those who tuned in late, became terrified. They failed to realize that this was just a play. In order to establish whether the events being "reported" were true, or simply to pass the news on to others, many called radio stations or the police, or telephoned friends, or ran to consult with neighbors, or ran out into the streets to find other people (Cantril, 1958).

It should be pointed out that attempts to communicate under such circumstances may fail. It is well known, for example, that when natural disasters strike, many try to use their phones at the same time. The typical result is a bottleneck.

The effects of an anticipated economic threat were studied in an interesting experiment conducted by Mulder and Stemerding (1963). Groups of small grocers from a number of different towns in Holland were each invited to attend a community meeting. They were led to believe that a supermarket chain had plans for locating in their particular community. It was further suggested to some groups that the chain would in all probability go through with its plan. Other groups were led to believe that this prospect was unlikely. A count was then taken through a questionnaire of each grocer's desire for further community meetings. Those for whom the economic threat was presented as quite probable expressed a greater desire for more meetings compared to grocers from whom the threat was unlikely to materialize.

A radically different determinant of communication is the size of an assembled group. It has been shown repeatedly (Bales & Borgatta, 1965; Barker, 1968; Thomas & Fink, 1963) that the amount of talking within a fixed time period by the average participant is apt to be considerably more in a small group than in a large group. One obvious reason for this is that in a larger group there is less opportunity for each participant to speak. Perhaps, also, a large group inhibits talking because there appear to be too many communication lines among which to choose.

To summarize, we have tried to show that a variety of environmental factors determine who talks to whom. Among such factors are the actual or perceived time available for conversation, the physical distance separating people, the functional distance separating them, including differences in language and culture, the setting, the occurrence of striking events, and

group size.

2. Recipient Selection of Communicators

In addition to selection constraints imposed by a recipient's environment, the recipient himself is a selective force in determining who talks to whom. For example, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948), on the basis of their study of voter behavior in the 1940 Presidential election, hypothesized a two-step flow of communication. That is, the mass media do not seem to have a direct impact on most people. Rather, a few individuals within the population, called opinion leaders, tend to expose themselves to the media and, in turn, influence others through face-to-face communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In general, an opinion leader is someone who is sought out by the recipient for advice (Weiss, 1969, p. 143), and acts as a filter or "gate keeper" (Lewin, 1958), systematically omitting information that occasionally may be useful to the recipient. They tend to be selected because they are "experts" or personify the values of the recipient (Katz, 1957).

Recipients are also selective, according to Festinger (1957), in that they tend to avoid communicators who hold contrary opinions. Reviews of this selective exposure hypothesis are available (Freedman & Sears, 1965; McGuire, 1968) and beyond the scope of this paper. It is interesting to note, however, that the hypothesis has not been well supported. In the communication context, field research reveals that people tend to discuss various issues with others having similar opinions (see above and Maccoby, Maccoby, Romney, & Adams, 1961; Newcomb, 1963). This apparent selectivity might be a reflection of something other than a desire to avoid listening to a discrepant opinion (Sears & Freedman, 1967). For example, communicators with similar opinions

might be more available or more attractive (Byrne, 1969) than communicators with discrepant opinions. In contrast to field studies, it is possible in laboratory studies to hold such availability factors constant while varying only the extent to which the communicator's views are discrepant from the recipient's. A couple of such studies which have been concerned with interpersonal verbal communication suggest that under certain conditions a recipient might even prefer a communicator with discrepant views. Brodbeck (1956) found, in the context of discussing attitudes toward wire tapping, that recipients preferred to listen to other group members with whom they disagreed. Walster and Walster (1963) demonstrated that, except under conditions where subjects thought the purpose of a discussion was to get the participants to like them, subjects most frequently chose to discuss dreams with people who were dissimilar to them. Dissimilarity, however, was not with respect to attitudes concerning the topic of discussion.

According to Newcomb (1947), recipients tend to selectively avoid communicators who have created a negative first impression. Therefore, recipients may not expose themselves to information that might show their impression to be erroneous. There are data which support this "autistic hostility" hypothesis. For example Kelley (1950) found that if a negative first impression of a classroom instructor were created (by describing him as cold rather than warm), students were less likely to enter into discussion with him. Thibaut and Coules (1952) found a negative correlation between how much a subject disliked a confederate and the number of units of communication sent to the confederate. Potashin (1946) had pairs of children plan a picnic. She found that discussion between friends lasted longer than discussion between non-friends.

3. Communicator Selection of Recipients

The communicator also exerts some influence in determining who talks to whom. Demographic characteristics such as sex, age, and race tend to have an effect on whom communicators choose as recipients. Support for this conclusion has been obtained by Stanley Milgram (1967, 1969) and his colleagues in an interesting series of studies concerned with what they call the "Small World Problem." The general procedure is to select a target person(s) in one part of the country, then randomly select a number of communicators in another part of the country. The communicators are sent a folder containing (1) pertinent information about the target person such as name, occupation, and location, (2) directions to send an enclosed document to the target person if the communicator personally knows him or, to send the document to someone the communicator knows on a first name basis that is more likely to know the target person. The communicator's acquaintance is also sent the same directions. Thus the document keeps moving until it reaches the target person or someone breaks the chain. Each person who participates in the chain adds his name to a roster, which circulates with the document, and returns a "tracer" card to the investigator with information about himself. By examining the information on the "tracer" card one can determine whom communicators choose as recipients.

In one study, the intermediaries chosen tended to be of the same age and sex as the communicator. Friends rather than relatives of the communicator also tended to be chosen (Travers & Milgram, 1969). In another study (Korte & Milgram, 1970), some black and some white persons were the targets of chains originating with white communicators. Communicator

selection of recipients tended to be along racial lines. "Negro-target chains either succeeded in making contact via an essentially white acquaintanceship network or else were exhausted within the white community without ever making a first contact with Negro networks." (p. 106)

If communicators are given a choice of speaking to a recipient with whom they agree or to one with whom they disagree, they tend to choose the disagreeing recipient. For example, Schachter (1951) studied discussion groups in which one experimental confederate consistently held an opinion which was deviant from that of the other group members while a second confederate held an "average" opinion. He found that the other group members were more likely to talk to the deviate than to the confederate who held the average position. This was true at each time period in the discussion regardless of whether the group was high or low in cohesiveness (i.e., was an attractive group to be in) or whether the opinion was relevant or irrelevant to group goals. Additional studies (Festinger & Thibaut, 1951; Gerard, 1953; Berkowitz & Howard, 1959) have yielded similar results.

Some of Newcomb's theorizing (1953, 1968) is consistent with these results if we assume that the discussants in these studies are attracted to one another. According to Newcomb, there is a "strain toward symmetry" among interacting persons. Symmetry is obtained when persons attracted to one another agree on important issues. Symmetry is important because it allows for the prediction of one another's behavior and facilitates interpersonal coordination. It also helps validate or provide social support for one another's opinion. When persons are attracted to one another and disagree, "communicative acts" tend to be initiated to restore symmetry.

There are also data consistent with the hypothesis that communicators tend to select recipients that are of higher status than themselves. For example, Thibaut (1950) found that boys assigned to low status play-groups tended to initiate more intergroup messages than those assigned to high status groups. Although additional studies in which status has been experimentally manipulated have been reported (e.g., Kelley, 1951), non-experimental studies seem to provide stronger support for the hypothesis. Back. Festinger, Hymovitch, Kelley, Schachter, and Thibaut (1950) found that, of 17 communicative acts concerning planted rumors of general relevance, 11 were directed upward and only 2 were directed downward in an organizational hierarchy. Likewise, Davis (1953) found that the grapevine in a particular company kept higher level managers better informed than lower level managers (cited in Porter & Lawler, 1965). Zander, Cohen, and Stotland (1959) found that lower status mental health professionals (e.g., social workers) show a greater desire to communicate with higher status professionals (e.g., psychiatrists) than vice versa over a range of topics. Hurwitz, Zander, and Hymovitch (1968) observed discussions among high and low status mental health professionals with similar results in terms of actual communication. Barnlund and Harland (1963) studied communication patterns among sorority women at a Midwestern university. Results indicated that, regardless of the prestige of the group considered, communication tended to be directed upward.

The tendency for communicators to select high status recipients appears to be more pronounced in a well developed status structure than one in its formative stage. Larsen and Hill (1958) studied two communities of boys in summer camp. They found that while communication was more often addressed to a higher status (i.e., more popular boys) in one community, just the opposite was found in the second community. The latter had a less well

developed social structure. Similarly, Collins (1960) observed the interaction in a college class in which free discussion was encouraged. Since high status people generally talk more and talk tends to be reciprocated, he controlled for these factors. Low status communicators were found to select high status recipients regardless of stage of group structure. The behavior of high status communicators was more complex. They initiated more communications to low status recipients in the early stages than in the later stages. Later on, they, like the low status communicators, tended to overselect high status recipients.

Communicators seem also to be selective on the basis of whether or not they think a particular message is relevant to or of interest to a recipient. Some of the data on rumor transmission are relevant to this proposition. For example, Festinger, et al. (1948) did a retrospective study of a rumor which had circulated in a housing project. Since the rumor concerned a person associated with a nursing school, they reasoned that the rumor would be most relevant to people having children between the ages of one and five. As anticipated, 62% of the persons in this category compared to 28% of those not in this category heard the rumor. Schachter and Burdick (1955) studied rumor transmission in a girls' school. In some classes they planted a rumor that exams had been stolen. In partially overlapping classes, they removed a girl to the principal's office without explanation. Virtually all the girls heard the rumor and learned of the girls' removal. However, among those girls for whom these events were most relevant, i.e., the girls in the same class as those who were removed, the events were discussed for a longer period of time and more communicative acts concerning the events were initiated.

In spite of the plausibility of the hypothesis, communicators do not always transmit more frequently to the person for whom the message is most relevant. For example, Tesser, Rosen, and Conlee (1972) found that there was a slight tendency for communicators to transmit good news more frequently to a person for whom the message was intended (Target) than to a bystander. However, when the news was bad, transmission was more frequent to the bystander than the target, in spite of the fact that unpublished post-experimental questionnaire data revealed that communicators rated targets as having more interest in the message, having a greater desire to know the message, and having a greater right to know the news regardless of whether it was good or bad. Also, Blumberg (1972) found that personal evaluations, regardless of whether they are positive or negative, tend to be discussed more frequently with friends of an individual than with the person being evaluated directly.

In sum, the literature reviewed argues for the conclusion that there is a great deal of systematic selection in determining who talks to whom. There are a number of environmental factors that operate in this selection process. Furthermore recipients tend to avoid listening to those they dislike. They systematically select others (opinion leaders) from whom they ask advice and they don't necessarily avoid listening to those with whom they disagree. Communicators tend to choose recipients who are similar in age, sex, and race. They also tend to address their communications to those with whom they disagree, those who are higher in status, and those for whom the message is most relevant.

B. BIASES IN MESSAGES TRANSMITTED

We have argued that one way in which the information we receive from others may be biased is that the people with whom we communicate

may overrepresent some kinds of persons and underrepresent others. In the previous sections we have discussed some of the variables which are important in determining how persons are selected for interaction. On the other hand, regardless of who the communicator is, the message we receive from him may be inaccurate. According to Campbell (1958) when a human being serves as a component in a communication system, the message is subject to certain systematic distortions. As we noted earlier distortion is possible when the communicator first receives or decodes the message and also when he transmits or encodes the message. Below we explore these biases in some detail.

Decoding and encoding biases clearly show themselves in an experimental procedure devised by Bartlett (1932). This procedure, known as the method of serial reproduction, consists of exposing an initial communicator to a message. He repeats the message to a second person who repeats it to a third persons and so on. The communication can be compared with the original at various points in the chain. The kinds of distortion typically found (Allport & Postman, 1947; Higham, 1951) are leveling, sharpening, and assimilation of various kinds. Leveling refers to a shortening of the message with a loss of detail. Sharpening refers to increasing the importance of or featuring certain details of the message. Assimilation refers to changes in the message (leveling and sharpening) so as to make it more psychologically compatible to the communicator. There are several types of assimilation (Allport & Postman, 1947): Assimilation to principal theme -- message is made more consistent with main point; Good continuation -- the adding of detail to complete a meaningful unit, production of closure; Assimilation by condensation -- the combining of elements into fewer units; Assimilation to

expectation -- the message is changed to be consistent with things as they usually are; Assimilation to linguistic habit -- the tendency to perceive and transmit the message in terms of verbal stereotypes and cliches; Assimilation to interest -- sharpening with respect to a detail of particular interest to the communicator; Assimilation to prejudice -- message is made consistent with communicator's own hatreds.

The method of serial reproduction has sometimes been viewed as an analog or model of the rumor dissemination process. As such, it suggests that rumors will tend to give a very distorted account of the original message. However, some studies of actual rumor circulation (e.g. Caplow, 1947; Schachter & Burdick, 1955) have found little evidence of distortion. Perhaps this discrepancy can be accounted for by noting that under non-laboratory circumstances more than one person is likely to be exposed to the original message and any single individual is likely to hear the rumor from several sources. Thus, checking can be done and discrepancies resolved. In the laboratory task as soon as one individual does not mention or distorts any portion of the message there is no way in which that portion can be accurately recovered in the remainder of the chain. This is not to suggest that naturally circulating rumors are completely free of distortion but rather that the distortion is less pronounced than would be suggested by the laboratory results.

The method of serial reproduction nicely illustrates the kinds of distortion that can occur when a human being serves as a link in a communication system. The distortion in this task can be attributed to biases in decoding and/or encoding. We can, however, be more specific concerning

the nature of these biases.

1. Biases in Decoding the Messages

The context in which a message is embedded can influence the way it is decoded. Manis (1967) gave subjects 72 descriptions of photographs of persons exhibiting various emotional states. In order to vary context, half the subjects were given 60 descriptions of pleasant emotional states and half were given 60 descriptions of unpleasant emotional states. For all subjects, the remaining 12 were neutral and served as test stimuli. Some subjects were asked, in a variety of ways, to rate the test messages for pleasantness. The results were unequivocal. The identical (neutral) test messages were judged as more pleasant in the unpleasant context than in the pleasant context.

The decoding of a particular message might also be affected by an individual's own feelings about the topic of the message. The social judgment theory of attitude change (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965) suggests that judging the meaning of interpersonal messages is similar to making psychophysical judgments such as of weight. Attitude-relevant messages tend to be seen as lying on a continuum. They are seen, for example, as lying somewhere between very favorable and very unfavorable. The recipient uses his own attitude as an anchor or reference point in judging where on the continuum the message lies. If it is close to his own attitude it tends to be assimilated (seen as closer); if it is far from his own attitude it tends to be contrasted (seen as further). Hovland, Harvey, and Sherif (1957) presented a communication that was moderately opposed to prohibition to subjects who held extreme attitudes in favor of prohibition, or moderate attitudes, or extreme attitudes against

prohibition. As predicted, the first group judged the communication as being more against prohibition than it was, the last group as being more in favor of prohibition than it was, and the middle group was relatively accurate in its judgments.

An alternative set of expectations concerning the effects of attitude on decoding a message has been suggested by Manis (1971, pp. 266-269, 1961a, 1961b). The thrust of the argument is that a communication from a credible source that is discrepant from an individual's own position puts pressure on him to change his attitude and therefore makes him uncomfortable. One way to reduce this pressure to change is to reduce the discrepancy by assimilating the message (from a high credibility source) and seeing it as closer to his own stand. If, however, the source of the communication is unknown or of low credibility, then the more discrepant the communication, the easier it is to derogate the source and lessen the pressure to change. With a highly discrepant message from an unknown or low credibility source, one might even expect the message to be contrasted or seen as even more discrepant so as to make it easier to discredit the source.

There are several studies consistent with Manis' line of reasoning. For example, Manis (1961b) and Berkowitz and Coranson (1964) have demonstrated that messages from credible sources are assimilated regardless of discrepancy. While Manis found no systematic assimilation or contrast effects when he reduced the credibility of the source, Berkowitz and Coranson did find clear contrast effects when the source was disliked. On the other hand, Crawford (1973) argues that those studies do not provide unambiguous support. In creating differences in credibility between communicators the

experimenters may have also inadvertently created differences in the extent to which the communicators were seen as similar to the subjects. That is, highly credible communicators may have been seen as more similar to the subject than communicators of low credibility. Therefore, the perception of where a message lies may be "... a straight-forward non-motivational inference from communicator-receiver similarity" (pp. 151-152). Crawford created differences in credibility in such a way that the highly credible communicator was dissimilar to the recipient and the low credibility was similar to the recipient. In support of his argument, he found that the message of a low credible but similar communicator was assimilated while the message of the high credible, dissimilar communicator was contrasted.

Not only does the location of a person's attitude on some continuum affect his decoding of a message, but the extent to which he is involved in that position also has an effect. Ward (1965) found that pro-Negro judges who were highly involved in their position (they belonged to a group who had picketed on behalf of blacks) and who were reminded of their involvement judged statements concerning Negroes as more anti-Negro than a group of judges who were equally pro-Negro and involved but were not reminded of their involvement. This latter group, however, saw the statements as more anti-Negro than a third group composed of subjects who were equally pro-Negro but were not as strongly involved in the race issue. Ward suggests an extension of Helson's (1964) "adaptation-level" theory to account for these results: To the extent that the subject is involved with the attitude issue, the neutral position on the scale (i.e. his adaptation level) is closer to his own attitude. Therefore, other positions are displaced even further to the other end of the scale,

Another factor that affects the decoding of a message is what a person expects to do with the message (i.e., his psychological set). Will he have to communicate it or will he receive more information about it? Will later information be congruent or incongruent? According to Zajonc (1960), various sets "tune in" different cognitive structures. A cognitive structure is a way of organizing and dealing with information. Thus, information an individual derives from a particular message and the way that information is organized will depend on the set he has when the message is encountered. Zajonc found that when subjects expected to transmit their impression of a job applicant the impressions they formed were more differentiated, complex, unified, and organized than those of subjects expecting to receive more information.

We have seen that cognitive structures for dealing with information may differ within the same person depending on what he expects to do with the information. Cognitive structures may also differ between persons regardless of their set. Interpersonal differences in cognitive structure tend to make communication less effective. Runkel (1956) argued that to the extent that students have cognitive structures similar to those of their instructors, communication is facilitated. This in turn, should result in higher grades for the similar students. He was able to find support for this hypothesis. Regardless of academic ability, students with cognitive structures similar to their own instructor's received better grades than students with dissimilar structures.

2. Biases in Encoding the Message

We have noted that the communication a recipient gets is limited in its accuracy by the accuracy with which the information has been originally decoded by the communicator. A further constraint on the accuracy of

information a recipient receives is the extent to which bias is introduced in the communicator's encoding of the message for the recipient. In this section we will be concerned with the question of what the communicator actually transmits, rather than with the question of who talks to whom or what information the communicator has (i.e., rather than decoding biases). A review of the relevant literature suggests that the role relationship between communicator and recipient often exerts a strong influence on what the communicator encodes for transmission to the recipient. Also, recipient-administered reinforcement contingencies and the communicator's perception of the receiver's attitudes and desires influence what gets encoded. Concerning role relationships, three will be singled out for illustrative purposes: the relationship with a stranger, the relationship between persons of unequal status or power, and role specialization among peers.

Few would question the assertion that when a recipient occupies the role of stranger, he should expect that what is transmitted to him will differ, in content as well as amount, from what is transmitted to acquaintances. Yet there appear to be two distinct, if not opposing, views as to the nature of these differences. One view (cf. Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, pp. 69-70) is that talk with a stranger, if it goes on at all, can be described as formal and constrained. The opposing view, first voiced by Simmel (Wulff, 1950, pp. 402-408), is that it is precisely because someone is a stranger that one can talk freely and exchange confidences with him. This latter view is epitomized in what some have come to call the "stranger on the train" phenomenon (Cozby, 1973; Murdoch, Chenowich, & Rissman, 1969; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Either view seems reasonable. Either can claim empirical support. An early experiment by French (1944) is cited by Thibaut and Kelley as support for the formality-and-constraint view. French had groups, consisting either of strangers or of acquaintances, interact in a frustrating situation. He noted a significantly greater incidence of aggressive remarks in the groups consisting of acquaintances than of strangers. Unfortunately, most of the aggressive groups of acquaintances were of working class, Italian origin, and/or adolescent boys. Therefore, differences could well have arisen because of ethnic and/or age differences in openness and use of expressive language. An experiment on bystander intervention (Latané & Rodin, 1969) included two conditions that bear on the formality-and-constraint thesis. Each subject in those conditions waited either with a friend or a stranger to participate in a market research study. After a few minutes they heard what sounded like a loud crash, a scream, and moaning by the market research representative (the experimenter) as she fell to the floor in the adjacent room. Although the interaction was not formally coded, it was the authors' impression that the conversation between the strangers was desultory and that reference to the accident was infrequent. In contrast, friends often discussed the accident and agreed on a plan of action. The data on helping were unequivocal: friends went to render assistance to a significantly greater extent than did strangers.

Perhaps the most systematic treatment of the formality-and-constraint argument is encountered in the theory of "social penetration" put forth by Altman and Taylor (1973), and the studies conducted by them provide the clearest evidence in favor of this argument. Their theory holds that the relationship between strangers proceeds over time from the exchange of a more restricted to a more extensive range of topics about the self, and from

the exchange of nonintimate to intimate self-disclosures. The rate at which these changes occur depends both on what these strangers were like to begin with and on situational factors. Typically in their studies each individual was asked to complete a self-disclosure scale on two or more occasions. The scale consisted of a number of categories, such as religion, income, and sex. Each category contained a number of items that differed with regard to intimacy level. The subject was usually asked, in the beginning, to indicate how many of the items contained information about himself that he had revealed to his "best friend" and to some casual acquaintance, respectively. After being brought together with another individual, he was asked to respond to the same scale, but with respect to his present partner. The results of these studies (Altman & Haythorn, 1965; Taylor, 1968; Taylor, Altman, & Wheeler, 1973) suggest that as time goes by, strangers who are thrown together tend to mention many more things about themselves to each other. While doing so, they progress from more superficial to more intimate and sensitive content areas.

A closer look at this process suggests that a reciprocity principle is at work between the interacting strangers. Namely, the number of different self-revelations one party makes tends to be matched by a comparable number from the recipient. Moreover, a given level of intimacy in self-disclosure tends to be matched by a comparable level from the recipient. In a number of relevant experiments (for a review see Cozby, 1973), one of the partners was in reality a confederate of the experimenter, who pretended to disclose few versus many things about himself (Chittick & Himmelstein, 1967), or less intimate versus more intimate facts about himself (Ehrlich & Graven, 1971). The subjects, by and large, reciprocated. Cozby (1972), however, provided

experimental evidence to suggest that reciprocity breaks down at highly intimate levels of disclosure. He reasoned that while it is flattering to be told intimate things, if the information is quite intimate this is anxiety-producing both for the speaker and listener.

Let us consider, now, the opposite viewpoint to the formality-and-constraint thesis: It suggests that the conversations between strangers, as when travelling together on a train, is more candid and easygoing than that between familiars. We will try to show that where easy conversation goes on between strangers, the circumstances are apt to be fleeting, unusual, or stressful. Thibaut and Kelley suggest (1959) that if strangers do not expect to meet again their conversation is apt to be at least as candid as that between familiars. This interpretation was offered by England (1950) to explain why only 1% of the pedestrians who were stopped by his interviewers in various towns and villages of Britain refused to answer questions about sexual attitudes. This refusal rate was no greater than that which England had experienced on the usual market research questionnaire. Murdoch, et al. (1969), in their experiment on self-disclosure, varied the subject's expectations of future interaction with a confederate. They obtained more self-disclosure when no future interaction was expected.

Extraordinary or stressful environmental conditions are apt to facilitate self-disclosure among strangers. Altman and Haythorne (1965) compared pairs of individuals isolated from contact with the outside world with pairs who were not isolated. Those who were isolated talked about many more things and more intimate things. Moreover, the level of topical intimacy of the isolated pairs was comparable to that reached with close friends of the respective individuals, while the intimacy level of the

non-isolated pairs only reached that of mere acquaintances. In an experiment involving only isolated pairs, Taylor, Altman, and Wheeler (1973) also varied the amount of privacy the individuals enjoyed from each other and the amount of external stimulation. During the first few days the pairs that lacked privacy and external stimulation showed the greatest amount of self-disclosure. According to Taylor *et al.*, such enhanced self-disclosure may be a form of enrichment to make up for the deficit in normal stimulation. At any rate, it is probable that such effects wear off. This could be due, perhaps, to a temporary exhaustion of the range of topics worth mentioning, or to simple exhaustion (Cozby, 1973), or to a breakdown in reciprocated communication at highly intimate levels of disclosure because of a mutual increase in anxiety (Cozby, 1972).

Stresses which threaten the existence of an ongoing group either from within or from without may increase the likelihood of candid conversation between members of that group and some stranger. Dissension is one internal stress. Vidich (1956) assigned husband-wife pairs the task of reaching agreement on issues concerning which they differed. Each spouse frequently tried to recruit the observer to one side or another of the controversy. Mills (1973) formed groups consisting of one naive subject and two confederates to work on a common problem. The extent to which the confederates were friendly to each other and/or the subject was varied experimentally. Later a new naive subject was introduced. Regardless of how the confederates behaved towards each other, if the original subject had been rejected by some member he initiated more rejecting remarks to the newcomer than if he had been befriended. The newcomer did not simply

retaliate. In those groups where the confederates sided with each other against the original subject, the newcomer proceeded to ally themselves with them against that original subject.

It appears as though the results of the Vidich and Mills studies contradict each other in that being disagreed with seemed to precipitate friendly overtures to the outsider in the former case whereas being agreed with precipitated supportive behavior to the outsider in Mills study. This discrepancy may arise from the possibility that when a decisional crisis occurs in even-sized groups (such as Vidich's) both sides could be expected to encode favorable communications to a stranger so as to break the deadlock and the stranger could feel free to initiate supportive communications to either side. In odd size groups (such as Mills') it would be more advantageous for the majority to court the stranger and for him to strengthen the majority by reciprocating, since supporting the minority would only increase the prospect of an unrewarding deadlock.

The superior-subordinate role relationship exerts a broad influence on what gets encoded. Earlier we suggested that communicators tend to select recipients with whom they disagree and who are higher in status than themselves. This does not necessarily imply that disagreement tends to be encoded in communicating upward. Some of E. E. Jones' (1964) research concerning the ways in which people behave in order to make themselves more attractive to others is relevant. One way to ingratiate oneself with a high status other is to communicate agreement with that other. In one study Jones, Gergen, and Jones (1963) found that low status persons (freshmen in ROTC) communicated more agreement to high status persons (upperclassmen in

ROTC) than vice versa on relevant opinion items dealing with military matters. Under ingratiation instructions everyone tended to encode more agreement than under control conditions but the status difference was still present. Correlational studies (cf. Lippitt, Polansky, & Rosen, 1952) also show that high power recipients receive more agreement than low power recipients.

The tendency to communicate greater agreement to high status recipients depends, to some extent, on the way in which the high status recipient is perceived. Jones, Gergen, Gumpert, and Thibaut (1965) performed an experiment in which some communicators were led to believe that their supervisor was free to determine their outcome while the others were led to believe that their supervisor did not have this power. In addition, some were led to believe that their supervisor valued solidarity and agreement. They predicted and found that the communication of agreement to high status recipients is most pronounced when that recipient is relatively free to determine the communicator's outcomes and values solidarity.

Status also affects the way in which influence messages and responses to such messages are encoded. Levinger (1959) manipulated status by leading some subjects to believe that (compared to their partner) they were highly competent town planners and others that they lacked such competence. Those who believed they had high competence encoded greater disagreements with sites suggested by the partner (a collaborator of the experimenter) and tried to influence their partner more with counter-suggestions of their own, than did subjects who believed they lacked such competence. Hollander and Julian (1970) have shown that leaders who are elected tend to encode

greater disagreement than do appointed leaders. It has also been noted that autocratic leaders received fewer suggestions from members than do democratic leaders (Lippitt & White, 1940).

The style of communication is also affected by status. In disagreeing, for example, elected leaders tend to use fewer and less conciliatory words (Holland & Julian, 1970), than do appointed leaders. High power individuals are also likely to appeal to their partner's loyalty in an effort to dissuade their low power partner from turning elsewhere for satisfaction. Low power individuals are likely to appeal to their partner's sense of fair play in an effort to receive a larger share of the rewards (Thibaut & Faucheux, 1965). To influence a high power individual those with low power are also likely to employ a relatively nondirective style (e.g., suggesting rather than demanding), while those with high power are likely to be demanding when they attempt to influence (Levinger, 1959; Lippitt, Polansky, & Rosen, 1952). Those with low power are also more likely to encode deferential remarks in communicating to a high power individual, these remarks implying that the high power individual has superior knowledge or skills. For example, they might ask his guidance and advice (Lippitt, Polansky, & Rosen, 1952).

Still another form of deferential behavior is reflected in the formality of address that people of different status levels use in talking to each other. Employees of a large insurance company were interviewed to determine whether they addressed their immediate boss, the boss's boss, a fellow worker, a subordinate, and the subordinate's subordinate, respectively, by first name or by their title and last name (Slobin, Miller, & Porter, 1968). They were also asked to indicate how they were addressed

in return. Those of equal or subordinate status were invariably addressed by first name, while those of superior status were addressed by title and last name. While age alone was not a determining factor, it is notable that when the superior was younger than the subordinate, naming tended to be symmetrical, and more often than not the symmetry involved formal address. To the authors this is an indication of the possibility that while achieved status rather than ascribed status (age) is considered important in our society, some deference to the latter may still exist.

The extent to which messages presenting one's self in a favorable light are encoded also seems to be affected by status. Jones, et al. (1963) found high status actors were more prone to communicate favorable descriptions of themselves on important attributes to low status actors than vice versa. The use of self-enhancement as an ingratiation tactic is, however, risky. It might cause one to appear boastful or conceited. Therefore, we would expect that such a tactic would be used only under certain conditions. Suppose a high status recipient can affect a communicator's outcomes but the communicator believes that the recipient is unaware of his power. Stires and Jones (1969) demonstrated that a communicator, under latter conditions, is more likely to encode positive things about himself than if the recipient is aware of his power.

Other differences in encoding also emerge in hierarchies. Kelley (1951) found that low status communicators were more likely to complain about their job to high status recipients than vice versa. When communicators and recipients were at the same status level, however, the extent of complaining about their job was not affected by whether both were high status or low status. In addition, status differentiation seemed to

inhibit the flow of explicit personal criticism--subjects in groups having no status differences engaged in more personal criticism than those in groups where status hierarchies were created.

Indirect evidence that some subordinates may even try to misinform superiors about their own problems is provided by Read (1962). He studied 52 second-level subordinates and their 52 respective third-level superiors in several industrial organizations. Read asked the subordinates to rank order a list of work-related problems with respect to how much difficulty they had encountered in dealing with each problem. Each superior was presented with the same list and asked to rank them with regard to the difficulty his subordinate had encountered in that area. Read found that the more upward mobile the subordinate had been (i.e., the more he had climbed the occupational ladder since he first began working), also the more he wanted to get promoted, the less accurate his superior was in ranking the difficulties which the subordinate encountered on the present job.

In this connection some additional findings of Slobin et al. (1968) are worth noting. Each subject was also administered a self-disclosure scale involving various aspects of his work and of matters unrelated to the job. He was asked to indicate whether he had ever confided such information to the boss, his closest fellow worker, a subordinate, etc., and whether the other had confided such information in return. Regardless of status level, the most self-disclosure was to individuals of the same status. In cases of unequal status, however, there was more self-disclosure to superiors than to subordinates.

Within small leaderless groups, different encoding biases are associated with different roles (Slater, 1955; Bales, 1958). Probably,

the two most distinctive roles to emerge from the study of such groups are those concerned, respectively, with furthering the group's efforts to accomplish its task, and with helping the group solve its social-emotional or morale problems. Task specialists tend to encode messages of relatively neutral, task-oriented content. The message contents encoded by the social-emotional specialists tend, however, to be emotional and person-oriented. Similar roles with similar encoding biases have been identified in the American nuclear family (Parsons, Bales, & Shils, 1953; Strodtbeck, 1951), with the father assuming the role of task specialist and the mother that of social-emotional specialist. Zelditch (1955) has extended this finding cross-culturally through an examination of ethnographic reports. A similar phenomenon has been shown to arise in mixed sex juries (Strodtbeck & Mann, 1956).

Reinforcement contingencies also affect encoding: A communicator will be guided in what he encodes by the rewarding or punishing feedback that he received in response to past encodings. A number of studies show that even if recipients systematically respond with such verbal reinforcers as "um hum" or "good" to things a communicator is saying, the communicator will increase the frequency with which he encodes the reinforced response (cf., Adams & Hoffman, 1960; Verplanck, 1955). Contingent reinforcement has also been found to affect self-disclosure. Taylor, Altman, and Sorrentino (1969) paired navy men with a partner (actually a confederate of the experimenter) for four sessions. The confederate was either supportive throughout, rejecting throughout, first supportive then rejecting, or first rejecting then supportive. Overall, subjects disclosed most under continuously positive conditions and least under continuously

negative conditions. Not only did they range over more topics of personal information under positive feedback but they also talked about more intimate things.

If a trainer rewards good performance, a learner is more likely to encode information concerning his own performance, than if the trainer punishes poor performance (Ring & Kelley, 1963). Since Read (1962), in the industrial study cited earlier, found that subordinates who wished to be promoted were more likely to mislead their supervisors about their job-associated difficulties, one wonders whether their prior experience with or observations of managerial practices took the principal form of punishment for poor performance.

Besides being influenced by role demands and reinforcement contingencies, a communicator is also guided in what he encodes by the attitudes that he infers his audience to have. For example, Manis, Cornell, and Moore (in press) asked communicators to summarize for the benefit of a partner the content of a neutral talk on the legalization of marijuana. Each subject also heard her partner state (via a tape recording) that she favored or opposed such legalization. Some subjects were then permitted to relay the message immediately. Others, however, had to listen to extraneous messages for six or twelve minutes before relaying the relevant message. The longer the delay between the decoding and encoding phases, the more the subject's oral summarization of the message was distorted in a direction favoring their partner's attitude. The question arises as to whether the Manis et al. finding primarily reflects an encoding (i.e., transmission) bias or whether it reflects mainly a decoding (or memory) bias. This question is particularly relevant inasmuch as earlier experimenters (Schramm & Danielson,

1958; Zimmerman & Bauer, 1956) found that a delay before transmitting affects the potential communicator's recollections of the original message in a direction favoring the position of the anticipated audience. Manis et al. tried to deal with this issue by having some of the communicators who experienced the delay learn of their partner's attitude before they had even heard the talk that they were to summarize, but other communicators learn of it just before they were asked to summarize the talk. There was a slight trend in the direction of greater biasing on the part of those who were informed early of the partner's attitude. Consequently, we cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that the encoding bias shown after a delay was brought on by a decoding or memory bias.

The effect of audience attitude on encoding has been more clearly demonstrated in the interview context (Cannell & Kahn, 1968). For example, blacks were found to express more resentment over discrimination to black interviewers than to white interviewers (Hyman, Cobb, Feldman, Hart, & Stember, 1954). Urban householders expressed more anti-Semitic sentiments when confronted by seemingly non-Semitic than Semitic interviewers (Robinson & Rhode, 1946). Working class respondents expressed more pro-labor sympathies to working class than to middle-class interviewers (Katz, 1942). Adolescent girls were more likely to report listening to parents and behaving in ways that would please a middle-class adult, when interviewed by an older person than by a younger person (Ehrlich & Riesman, 1961).

The evidence that communicators tend to encode with greater frequency those messages which would be rewarded rather than punished by the recipient, and those which are consistent rather than inconsistent with the recipient's attitude, can be interpreted in a way which is, perhaps, more general. It seems reasonable to suppose that punished messages and

inconsistent messages are assumed by the communicator to be unpleasant for the recipient but that rewarded and consistent messages are assumed to be pleasant. This suggests a general, pervasive bias on the part of communicators to encode messages which are pleasant for the recipient and to avoid encoding those which are unpleasant.

Rosen and Tesser (1970) have termed this alleged tendency to keep mum about unpleasant messages the "MUM effect." They used a laboratory experiment to demonstrate the phenomenon. Subjects who were engaged in making judgments for a consumer preference study overheard a telephone message for a subject (the recipient) who had not yet arrived. The message was that the recipient should be told to call home. Further, half the subjects heard that the call concerned bad news and half that it concerned good news. Finally, while each subject was alone the recipient showed up for the experiment, thereby providing the subject with an opportunity to transmit the message. Virtually, all the subjects told the recipient to call home. Also, 82% of the subjects who thought the news was good mentioned that fact. On the other hand, only 26% of the subjects who overheard the bad news message mentioned that it was bad. This dramatic difference in the propensity to encode good as compared to bad news occurred in spite of the fact that the recipient asked the subjects if there was anything else to the message. In another laboratory experiment, Tesser, Rosen, and Conlee (1972) found that although subjects were more willing to encode good news than bad news when the recipient was the person for whom the news was relevant, there appeared to be no reluctance to encode good news or bad news when the recipient was someone for whom the news was not relevant.

These data suggest that when something goes wrong, the person most affected may be the least likely to be told about it. If and when he does hear, it may be third hand. Physicians often place nurses in the unenviable position of informing a dying patient and his family of his terminal illness (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). We sometimes attach the label, buckpassing, to such arrangements. Rosen, Grandison, and Steward (1973) conducted a laboratory experiment in which subjects were led to believe they were testing a job applicant for a certain position. If it was clear from the (rigged) test results that the candidate failed, subjects requested their assistant to tell this to the candidate, but if the candidate passed they brought him the news themselves.

In trying to explain why the MUM effect occurs, Tesser and Rosen (in press) have suggested that a number of factors must be considered. Some of these factors are associated with the communicator's concern with (1) his own outcomes (cost and rewards), (2) the recipient's outcomes, and (3) the normative requirements of the communication situation.

If the communicator experienced greater psychological costs when encoding bad news than good news, we would expect a MUM effect to result. Suppose the communicator felt guilty when telling a recipient about some negative consequence which he (the communicator) does not also suffer. To avoid such guilt feelings the communicator might simply fail to encode the bad news message. Consistent with this line of reasoning is Tesser and Rosen's (1972) finding that the MUM effect is eliminated when the communicator shares the recipient's fate associated with the good and bad news (not being shocked vs. being shocked).

The communicator may fear being disliked or negatively evaluated by the recipient if he encodes bad news. Since he does not want to bear

this cost, he does not encode bad news. This possibility serves, in fact, as an alternative explanation of the results just mentioned. When the communicator does not share the recipient's fate, he has more reason to fear that the recipient will attribute malevolent intent to him, or will derogate him out of jealousy, than when the communicator shares the recipient's fate. Therefore, he should be more willing to encode the bad news. Johnson, Conlee, and Tesser (in press) reasoned that if feelings of guilt are responsible for the MUM effect then what the communicator himself believes concerning the sharing of fate should determine transmission. On the other hand, if fear of negative evaluation is responsible for the MUM effect, then what the communicator thinks the recipient believes concerning the sharing of fate should determine transmission. An experiment was conducted in which what the communicator believed and what he thought the recipient believed concerning the sharing of fate (being shocked) were independently manipulated. While the guilt hypothesis could not unequivocally be ruled out by the results, only the prediction based on the fear of negative evaluation hypothesis was significantly supported.

A third communicator cost is concerned with his mood. Tesser, Rosen, and Waranch (in press) suggest that in order to communicate appropriately, the communicator must adopt a mood consistent with the news -- pleasant for good news and unpleasant for bad news. If he is unwilling to adopt a negative mood he would be reluctant to transmit bad news. Results of a study in which mood was experimentally varied indicated that subjects in an unpleasant mood were more likely to encode both good and bad news than subjects in a pleasant mood. Tesser, et al., interpreted these results as consistent with the hypothesis: Pleasant mood subjects are less likely to

tell bad news because this would require a change to an unpleasant mood; unpleasant mood subjects are more likely to tell good news because they are eager to change to a pleasant mood.

The MUM effect might also result from the communicator's concern with the recipient. For example, the communicator may be reluctant to get a recipient emotionally upset and therefore would tend to withhold bad news. To test this hypothesis King (1972), also Tesser and Conlee (1973), gave subjects an opportunity to encode bad news for a recipient whom they were led to believe was either an emotional person or a calm person. Although recipient emotionality had no effect in King's study, Tesser and Conlee did find that the bad news was more likely to be encoded for a calm than an emotional recipient.

There is another way in which the communicator's concern for the recipient might produce a MUM effect. Perhaps people tend to behave toward others in a way which is consistent with what they believe those others prefer. Communicator's may assume others want to be told good news but do not want to be told bad news, then behave accordingly. (This assumption, incidentally, may be inaccurate. For example, although physicians assume terminal patients do not want to be told about their illness, patients say they do want to be told. (Feifel, 1963; Life, 1972). Conlee and Tesser (in press) studied the encoding of good and bad news messages for a recipient who was represented to communicators either as wanting to be told or not wanting to be told, or for a recipient whose desires were not made known. They found that where the recipient's desires were unknown communicators assumed that she wanted to be told good news and not bad news. Furthermore, encoding tended to be more strongly affected by recipient desire than by whether the news (which concerned the subject's alleged competency) was

good or bad. In fact, the net MUM effect was substantially reduced in those conditions where the recipient's desire to be told was made explicit.

The previous discussion makes clear how such psychological variables as the communicator's concern for his own outcomes and his concern for the recipient can produce a MUM effect. There may be another, more sociological explanation. Society constrains its members' behavior with respect to various domains by rewarding "appropriate" behavior, punishing "inappropriate" behavior, or simply not making alternative behaviors available. The resulting behavioral regularities are known as norms and normative behavior tend to take on an aura of "correctness" and "oughtness". Tesser, Rosen, and Batchelor (1972) had a number of subjects state how good or bad the news contained in a variety of messages was for the recipient, how obligated they would feel to communicate each message, and how probably it was that they would transmit the message. The investigators then examined each message to determine the extent to which subjects agreed with one another concerning feelings of obligation and probability of transmission. If norms concerning news transmission are clear and unambiguous there should be a good bit of consensus. They found that on both obligations to transmit and probability of transmission the degree of consensus was greater for messages rated as good news than for messages rated as bad news. This suggests that a MUM effect may arise in our society because norms concerning the transmission of bad news are less clear than those concerning the transmission of good news.

Just what a communicator puts into a message when transmitting may leave the recipient with a distorted view. We have reviewed a number of

factors which influence what the communicator encodes and have tried to indicate the kind of bias associated with each. Role relationships between communicator and recipient exert a profound influence on what gets encoded. Also, the affective quality of the message is important - good news tends to be encoded while bad news does not.

Post-script

In this module we have examined some of the ways in which the information we get (or do not get) from others might leave us with a distorted picture of the world. We tend to be selective in whom we talk to and listen to. We may be listening to someone who originally decoded the message inaccurately or who encoded it inaccurately. In spite of these biases, however, we still depend on others for information and usually this information is useful. How might this be the case? First, even fallible information is often better than no information at all. Second, the information we receive from another is seldom the only relevant information we have. We can often check it against our own sense impressions, our rational processes, and information from other communicators. Each source of data we have, whether it be sensorial, rational, or interpersonal, is fallible but fallible in a different way. In juxtaposition, the errors of each tend to cancel out and from their commonality emerges a reasonably accurate representation of the world.

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Footnotes

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